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Bolgatanga Library: Adaptive Modernism in Ghana 40 Years on

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INTRODUCTION

At Ghana's independence from British rule in 1958, a rudimentary network of libraries had been established by the exiting colonial administration. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, had hoped to advance a regional spread of libraries as sources of education and information across the country. He engaged the young African American architect Max Bond to design a small community focused library for the northern town of Bolgatanga. Built in the late 1960s it had been planned as a prototype but it remained unique due to the political events following its construction.¹

Bolgatanga library represents arguably Bond's most significant contribution to Ghana's modern architecture.² The design invites to a closer reading of the architect's cultural relationship and allegiances to Ghana and its post-independence development first before focusing on the later adaptations in use and architecture.

The library still exists and functions today. For a decade it has functioned also, possibly more significantly, as the venue for a local evangelical church which rents out the community room and the adjoining lobby area, for use on Sundays. The tacit arrangement between the church and the library suggests that the rental also involves the church being involved in helping with the maintenance and upkeep of the part of the premises it uses on a weekly basis.³

This paper seeks to understand what contextual and physical design features have ensured that Bolgatanga library has resisted major alterations or wholesale demolition. Just as importantly it investigates the relationship between its continued delivery of core library functions and local (religious) community functions. The fundamental flexibility of Bond's library design is also examined in relation to its contemporary functioning; as both library and spiritual venue. It concludes by considering what future Bolgatanga library might have in the context of a new media age, and the demands of other community-based organizations, whose diverse needs it may have to adapt to.

THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT TO BOLGATANGA LIBRARY

Ghana, formerly the British Gold Coast colony in West-Africa, attained its 'independence' in 1957 and became a Republic in 1958, the first Sub-Saharan country to be self-ruling. Internationally, then all eyes were directed to this new nation at the height of the initial post-war development trajectory of Britain's former colonial possessions. Kwame Nkrumah, its first president, was determined to prove that his republic could realise a development miracle with a Ghanaian version of socialism.⁴

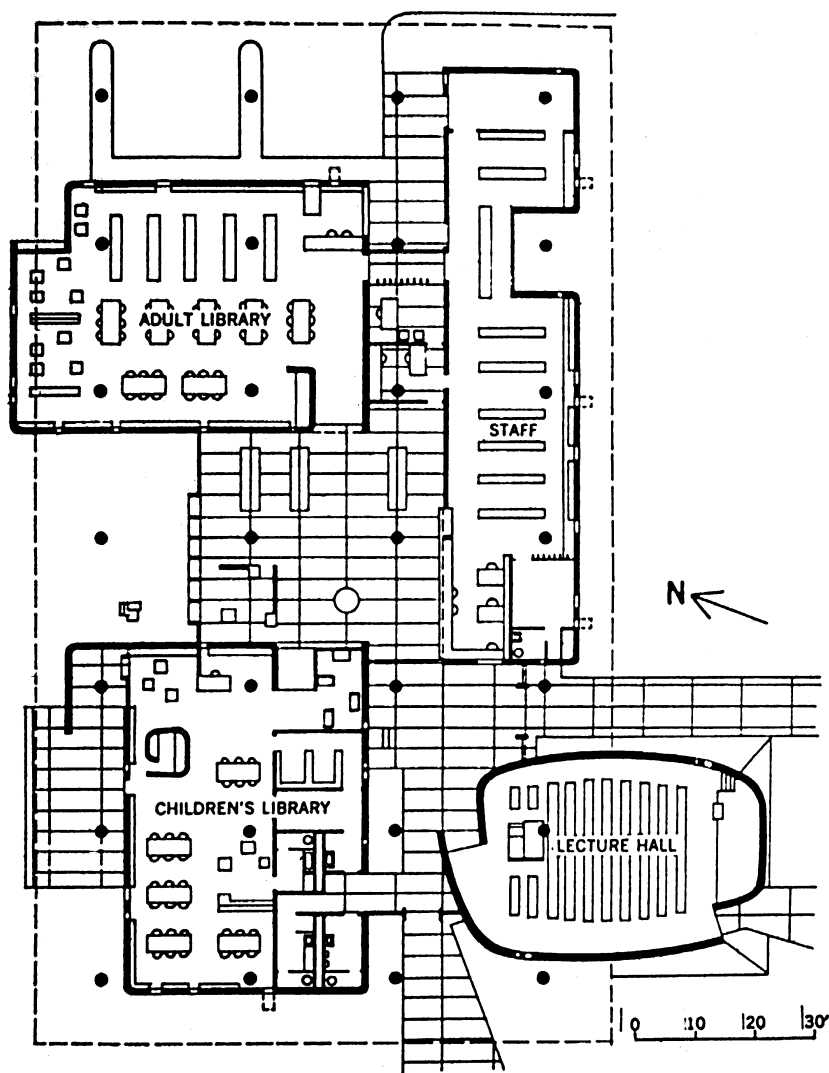


Figure 1. Bolgatanga Library Plan, Architect Max Bond.
Source: Courtesy Davis Brady Bond Archive 2008

At its independence the country had inherited the fruits of the first and second Schools programmes, which had been partly funded by the colonial office in the UK, and resulted in Fry and Drew's first major commission as young design architects for schools across Ghana and Togo.⁵ The colonial government had also established a library service similar to that in Nigeria.⁶

Nkrumah's government had education as a major focus for the Republic's development, the setting up of the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi and further expansion of the existing University of Ghana at Legon were a testimony to this aim. Also important was the espousing of industrialization and technology. Therefore, it was important that the country would have sufficiently trained manpower to draft and realise the ambitious industrial and construction

development plans. Like most African countries until self-rule, the Ghanaian construction and building industry had been almost entirely in the hands of expatriate firms, mainly, but not exclusively from the UK and, consequently, the technological knowledge as well. After a rough start with US advisers, the new Architecture school at Kumasi was developed with the help of the Architectural Association School of Tropical Architecture. Max Bond, as a practicing architect, joined the school from the start.

The Kumasi Architecture School dealt also with community research and rural development programmes. It would seem natural then that the Government would enlist its help in the development of an initiative such as the library building project. The larger projects were generally still handled, in the post-independence period, by large international companies, from more socialist leaning countries who were sympathetic to the Socialist agenda of Nkrumah's government.

The period would see the initiation of the Akosombo Dam, and the restructuring of the former agrarian production system into a centralized system of powerful marketing boards. The dam project was preceded by a survey done by Kumasi architecture graduate students on the conditions of villagers near the Dam site. The Cocoa marketing board however commissioned the British architects Fry and Drew to design their headquarters building in Accra.⁷

In 1966, however, Ghana was thrown into turmoil by its first military coup and the removal of Nkrumah and his government from power. As a consequence the library project was never expanded and the Bolgatanga library survives as a unique memory of this bygone era and its nation-wide educational ambitions.

THE ARCHITECT: MAX BOND

J. Max Bond Jr. (b. 1935), who came to work in Ghana at its independence, was from an academic background. His father had been involved in administering overseas education aid programmes for America and in running the University of Liberia; his mother was a graduate of North Western University.⁸ He studied architecture at Harvard and after graduation he spent time in Tunisia before working in the offices of Le Corbusier in France although never actually meeting him. This diversity of influences was present in his architecture before his move to Ghana with his family in his mid-20s in 1958.

His four-year stay was short but eventful. Bond was part of a small group of African-Americans in Ghana, committed to helping in the establishment of Africa's first fully independent state. They also were escaping the limited opportunities and incipient racism present in the Architectural profession in the USA in the 1950s. Bond had, despite his academic and practice credentials, found it hard to find a position in an Architectural firm in the USA despite his period as a Fulbright Scholar in Paris and practice experience gained in Le Corbusier's offices.⁹



Figure 2. Bolgatanga Library Approach.

On first approach the curved form of the community room is prominently in view, integrated with this form are the rectilinear main library area, the outdoor theatre area and the children's intermediate library areas. The floating or "umbrella" roof does enclose the disparate functional spaces and is ever present in the library encounter.

Photo: author, 2007



Figure 3. Bolgatanga Library Interior.
Photo: author, 2007

Ghana, from the late 1950s to the collapse of Nkrumah's government, had been a magnet for African American intelligentsia, with the Caribbean academic W.E.B. Du Bois' historic involvement in setting up a research base there, and cultural ambassadors such as Louis Armstrong visiting its shores seemingly making this link concrete. Ghana was seen as the land of future opportunities where colonialism had been beaten and Africans were starting to develop their own future economies. Indeed the Black-American radical Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) was adviser to Nkrumah before eventually emigrating to Guinea.¹⁰

Employed by Ghana's national construction company, effectively the buildings wing of

Nkrumah's Socialist government, Bond called himself, ironically, "the Palace architect"¹¹ and was involved in all building works decreed by Nkrumah. He also taught and researched at the newly formed Architecture school in Kumasi and worked with the then AA-trained group who were running the institution during this period. He developed a studio of fieldwork-based design in collaboration with the architect Christian Polanyi and the then head J.P. Lutz Christians.¹²

For Bond, with one foot in academia and another in architectural design and construction, the Bolgatanga library must have been the ideal commission to demonstrate the architectural pedigree he had acquired from his different contexts.¹³ Besides, the development of the Tropical Architectural Research Institute, being pioneered by the Building Research Institutes and the AA Tropical School, influenced the library's design in its more Northern 'Arid' Climatic Zone.¹⁴

Interestingly, Bond consistently names the Bolgatanga library as his favourite building.¹⁵ In retrospect, his time in Ghana was a life changing experience. As the regime in Ghana changed after the military coup d'état, it was clear that the golden post-independence era and its aspirations was over. Bond returned to the USA, where he initially became involved in the Harlem regeneration project.¹⁶

His practice, Davis, Brody, Bond Architects, remains a major multicultural firm in East Coast USA, and still retains links with Africa, through the recruitment of interns from Ghana, Nigeria, and other parts of Africa including Mozambique and Zimbabwe.¹⁷

THE EVOLUTION OF THE LIBRARY

The Bolgatanga library could be described as an essay in form, performance and aesthetics. Max Bond described it in his Washington Post Interview, concisely as "four separate buildings under an "umbrella"-style roof, with ventilation occurring naturally through the open spaces between roof and walls".¹⁸

The unassuming low building is nowadays partially sheltered by the Nim tree vegetation in an outer suburb of Bolgatanga. Today it is painted green and white and though not derelict, could do with renovation and conservation efforts.

The influences of Le Corbusier's modernism are clearly reflected by the moulded form of the community area and the free flowing spaces in the library interior. The cast concrete form of the open air theatre space at the West and the shell roof explore effectively the qualities of modern 'new' materials in this location far away from the metropole. Similarly, the judicious use of perforations, mainly windows, and the breeze blocks providing shade have a direct effect on the overall form

of the building. In all, the sum of the parts seems greater than the whole as the full composition seems understated and low key from the exterior.

After forty years, the original design of the library still enables it to carry out its main function - the issuing and collecting of books from the regional schools and other colleges – with minor changes to adapt to some of today's technology requirements. Some of the furniture, lighting and signage survive in their original forms within the building.

The ancillary facilities which were designed to demonstrate the community focus of the library, however, seem to have changed or no longer function. The community meeting room, is now-days serving an evangelical church which is involved with its upkeep. The open air theatre/film space seems disused, although its sculpted form remains a prominent part of the building's composition. The building has thus at least a double if not triple identity in functional terms.

During office hours it functions as a library, on Sundays and holy days it is a Church, and possibly on most afternoons and evenings it lies closed as originally scheduled functions are not being carried out. The church function had been established for at least ten years according to the security guard on site, and could only be ascertained to be an informal arrangement between the church elders and the Library officials.¹⁹

On the author's visit to the library on a hot day in June 2007, the building was animated by the church members. They had just closed their morning service and were meeting outdoors, so that much of the surrounding area remained a quiet backdrop to the religious activities.

The interiors were cool and the reading areas of the classroom were well-lit so that there was no need of electric lighting. We could see no evidence of structural instability. The orientation and layout were thought out carefully and properly enough to ensure the best of shading and lighting to create environmental comfort to its users in the midst of the day.²⁰

The relatively low key nature of the Library and its clear and modest function have been central to the building's longevity and success in withstanding 'change'. Bolgatanga remains a small town in Northern Ghana and contextual change has been gradual at all levels. On visiting the library, much of the book stock was dated, and there was no visible public access to ICT facilities. This stasis has been inadvertently good for the library's survival and relative lack of architectural transformation.

Possibly the real answer to Bolgatanga's continued success is the community, specifically the religious community's willingness not only to use the building but also to contribute and work towards its upkeep. This brings us full circle to the original objective of the library project – to reach out to the local community it served. Today's "community" being served is the local evangelical church, whose members have inherited a purpose built community facility, easily transformed into a religious space. The church has however "cherry picked" this room and foyer for its use, ensuring its good upkeep. However mono-functional lending and reserve space has been left to the cash-strapped authorities to maintain. Thus there is now only limited community use and outreach of the entire building as the church has monopolized the main functional community outreach space for its exclusive use, albeit for a fee.



Figure 4. Bolgatanga Library Community Room – nowadays in use as an Evangelical Church.
Photo: author, 2007

THE FUTURE

Built in a time of hope and aspiration, the Bolgatanga library was a prototype building of its time. Forty years later the question is if the current relationship with the church will last long enough to ensure a supplementary funding stream for the maintenance of the entire building.

Simply observed the building's design and structure remain robust and able to endure further years of use. The socio-economic climate, and the introduction of modern ICT methods for communication is less 'know-able', and even less so its long term effect on existing buildings and their current programme design. It may be however that as the Bolgatanga library has survived the initial desktop computer communications phase, with the move to hand held and mobile ICT communications, space use is no longer at risk, as mobile telephony and laptops are much less space intensive.

Architecturally Max Bond's library design has responded to both its initial programme and also the architectural climate of the time. The clear design references to both modernist movement and tropes in volume and form, while the floating roof and incorporation of high thermal mass walls and intermediate spacing respond to the locally dry arid climate. It could be further interpreted as an architectural lesson in form and function for his architecture students at Kumasi.²¹

Its function as a public building and its symbolic exterior also could be read as a paen to the hopes and aspirations of the newly emerging African nation state. Designed by a young architect whose influences and beliefs were central to the project's objectives; the delivery of wider, democratic access to information, and also a signifier of change showing transition from the colonial to the aspirational era of self governance.

The 21st century poses different issues compared to the late 20th century, while most developing countries in Africa and elsewhere see their economies fail as a result of both local economic problems and the global downturn. By 2000 many of the least developed nations were scoring lower on socio-economic indicators than they had done in the 1960s when they had attained self-rule. The United Nations declaring the Millennium development goals campaign acknowledged the need to redress this situation.

The 21st century, despite being clearly more global and connected in media and communications, is different. The buildings and infrastructure that formed the backdrop to our 20th century existence, are expected to perform different functions; buildings are smarter and better interconnected, they also have environmental and social responsibilities which were possibly not as critically scrutinised as they are today, as disciplines as disparate as such as environmental psychology and environmental sustainability have highlighted.

Bolgatanga Library and its successors will need to be more community integrated and focused, which may mean engaging with new communities of interest and expanding existing group membership and usage. The building's function and programme are likely to undergo further forms of scrutiny as new media integrates more closely with information networks.

For the architecture of Bolgatanga library these issues are less immediate. The structure is being recommended for listing as being of significant architectural interest. Its current function and state of repair works reasonably well with the division between its formal use as a lending library and its religious uses at weekends. In the long run, however, it will be important to consider a better strategy to ensure the building's preservation without alienating the public. Its transformation into an open to the public reference library for architectural building records in Northern Ghana, might be a way forward. Its future, we hope, will remain in good hands.

NOTES

- 1 See also Le Roux (2004). The library was officially opened by the Chairman of the Ghana Library board., Lawrence Oforu-Appiah in 1969.
- 2 Bond, M (1968) "A Library for Bolgatanga"
- 3 Communication with security guard at Bolgatanga Library, June 2007
- 4 For an overview of Ghana's early transition from colonial rule to independence see: Birmingham 1980
- 5 Uduku and Le Roux (2003) *AA in Africa exhibition*, Architectural Association London
- 6 Bond (1968)
- 7 *ibid*, also West Africa Builder and Architect (WABA) 1968
- 8 Obituary articles for each parent: *J Max Bond Snr, 89, An American who headed Liberian University* (New York Times, December 18th 1991, Eric Pace) "*Ruth Clement Bond, Quilter, 101 and Civic Leader is Dead*" (New York Times, November 13, 2005, Margalit Fox)
- 9 Washington Post, (2004) *Blueprint of a Life*, July 1st 2004
- 10 Toure (2005) *Ready for the Revolution*.
- 11 Washington Post, (2004)
- 12 West Africa Builder and Architect (WABA) vol 8 no. 2 1968
- 13 Washington Post, (2004)
- 14 For more on Tropical Architecture and Research see Uduku (2004) "*Modernist Architecture and the Tropical in West Africa*"
- 15 Washington Post 2004 *op cit*
- 16 Interview with Max Bond November 2004
- 17 Interview with Bond (2004) and Washington Post (2004)
- 18 Washington Post 2004
- 19 Communication with Security Guard, June 2007
- 20 This may well also have been influenced by Koenigsberger et al who were members of the AA tropical school and specialized in Environmental 'climatic' Design as had Fry and Drew, whose book, *Village Housing in the Tropics* (Fry +Drew:1947), described their experiences as architects in the Gold Coast in the mid 1940s – 50s.
- 21 Otto Koenigsberger, both headed the Tropical School at the Architecture Association in London, spent time in Ghana in the 1960s as a planning consultant, and worked on the textbook, *Manual of Tropical Architecture*, (Koenigsberger et al:1974), which has 'optimum' design guides for buildings in various tropical climates, - Bolgatanga would be considered a warm dry climate design type.

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